

Association of Village Council Presidents Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Association of Village Council Presidents North Pacific Fishery Management Council Meeting – Agenda Item D1 – Salmon Bycatch

**Vivian Korthuis, Chief Executive Officer
December 13, 2022**

My name is Vivian Korthuis. I serve as the Chief Executive Officer for the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP). I am Yup'ik, and a member of the Emmonak Tribe. I will be speaking to agenda item D1, Salmon bycatch. This is the third year of an unprecedented salmon crash in Western Alaska, the third summer families have been unable to fish, and the third season our people are going hungry for the food that has sustained us for generations. This means over 100,000 people on the Bering Sea Coastline of Western and Interior Alaska, along the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers are experiencing famine for the third year in a row. Famine is the extreme scarcity of food. It is unacceptable, in my opinion, to Alaska and especially the United States, to witness famine in our State and in our Country. We are Salmon People. Salmon is our primary food in our villages, and it has disappeared from our rivers, smokehouses and freezers. It is long past time for this Council to take action to reduce Chinook and Chum salmon bycatch.

Salmon Bycatch

In 2022, over 245,000 Chum salmon were caught as bycatch and in 2021 over 550,000 Chum salmon were caught as bycatch – the second highest bycatch on record in a time when our people had no opportunity to fish and our smokehouses were empty. If 19% of the Chum salmon bycatch is from Western Alaska, this means roughly 46,500 salmon bound for Western Alaska were wasted this year and over 104,000 in 2021, in a time when these fish were needed to feed our people and meet escapement goals. The Council has refused to take action to reduce Chum salmon bycatch. While there are many factors affecting Western Alaska salmon, bycatch by the pollock fleet is a factor squarely within the Council's control. The entire burden of conservation for our vulnerable salmon stocks has been placed on our tribal families and subsistence communities – the ones living in areas with the highest cost of living, and the ones with the least amount of economic resources. We are the most highly restricted subsistence fishers in the Nation, while thousands of bycaught salmon are wasted. This is not right. The Council must act now to reduce salmon bycatch by all possible means.

Harvest Specifications

In addition to immediate action to reduce bycatch, the Council must also reform the way it makes all management decisions and begin basing its decisions on accurate and current science and Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge. For too long, the Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has relied on an outdated Programmatic Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement and Harvest Specifications Environmental Impact Statement for Groundfish to make decisions about the groundfish fisheries. These decisions have played a major role in the current salmon crisis in Western Alaska. Rapid and accelerating changes in the ocean are affecting all life from the ocean floor to the surface, and all our communities in Western Alaska. We appreciate the Council's recent commitment to reevaluating the Programmatic EIS to consider how it should manage fisheries considering our rapidly changing marine ecosystem. But we are concerned that as this potentially extended process begins, the Council and NMFS continue to make fisheries management decisions based on outdated information, without fully considering the harm those decisions cause in light of more recent information about the state of our whole ecosystem.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to remind you that we depend on salmon to feed our families. We are Salmon People. Our people are suffering as both Chinook and Chum salmon disappear from our rivers. We are doing our part, with tremendous sacrifice, and it is time for the Council to do your part and reduce Chinook and Chum salmon bycatch. Last week our board of directors met. Our Elders spoke of the need to fight for the salmon to fill our stomachs. The lack of salmon is affecting our bellies – our food and our Way of Life. I am asking the Council to take on that challenge from our board of directors and join us as we fight to feed at least 100,000 people in Western Alaska who consider salmon more than just protein, but a Way of Life.

Earlier, a man was speaking and his point was that there is a cost to the fleet to avoid Western Alaska salmon. I agree there is a cost to catching Western Alaska salmon. I believe there is a cost to catching those same salmon by the fleet to Alaska residents living in Rural Alaska all along the Bering Sea Coast and both the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers. The cost to us shows up in empty freezers, smokehouses, and stomachs of elders, children, and whole communities. Our “fleet” consists of 56 villages and have names such as Alakanuk, Russian Mission, Quinhagak, Akiak, and so on. We have lived and fished here since before statehood for thousands of years and I believe we have a stake in this process and the Council needs to weigh the impact directly on human beings who are also Alaska residents living in our villages.

All of us have a stake in our salmon. You, as a Council, need to do your part in this bigger puzzle as we figure out how to make salmon sustainable for everyone, including the villages on the Yukon-Kuskokwim River Systems. We are open and want to work with the Council to fulfill its responsibilities by ensuring that any analysis is meaningful, and that it considers the impacts on our communities and the thousands of years' worth of traditional knowledge relevant to fisheries management for all of us, not just a select few.

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For additional information, please contact AVCP Communications Director, Gage Hoffman at 907-543-7308 or email at ghoffman@avcp.org

AVCP is a regional nonprofit tribal consortium comprised of the 56 federally recognized tribes of the YK Delta. The geographic boundaries of AVCP extend from the Yukon River Village of Russian Mission downstream to the Bering Sea coast, north up through Kotlik and south along the coastline to Platinum and then extending up the Kuskokwim River to Stony River, including Lime Village on the Stony River tributary. The area encompasses approximately 6.5 million acres, or 55,000 square miles, in Western Alaska.